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Book Review:

Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914–1945, by Enzo Traverso. Translated by David Fernbach. Verso. 2016. 304 pages. £9.99, ISBN 10: 1784781339, ISBN 13: 9781784781330

Reviewed by Chris Goldie

Abstract

Fire and Blood aims to establish the validity of a European civil war, 1914–45 as an historical period. It argues that all “participants” whether civilians or belligerents were governed by its precepts, and that all modes of critical thinking, ethical discourse, artistic and cultural representation and political theory were drawn into its ambit, foreclosing on the possibility of thinking outside of its logic. From this logic flows its use of sources such as Carl Schmitt, its interpretation of violence, and its assessment of the contradictions of antifascism. There is an extensive discussion of the phenomenology of civil war, characterised by limitless violence and novel forms of conflict. The review considers critically the book’s periodisation and the tension it creates between the identification of geopolitical historical processes and those of an apparently transhistorical character.

Fire and Blood has to be understood first as an exercise in periodisation. It is also much more than this, but the strengths and weaknesses of Traverso’s conception of the sequence of time from 1914 to 1945 as a coherent phase of European history are intrinsic to the process of its construction as a period. Some historical periods once appeared to be self-evident, but no historian since the publication of Fernand Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* in the late 1940s can be unaware of their artificial nature. Historical periods are the forcing of temporal flow into a frame, one with no existence prior to its identification, a structure made for a purpose. Periods are not primarily chronologies within which the mere succession of one event by another provides historical meaning. Periodisation is an interpretive tool, designed to pursue an intellectual task or question, through which certain features – agents, identities, processes, places – are abstracted from the flow of time, not simply as aggregations of events happening within the same time frame but as sets of correspondences and connections within which disparate and distinct phenomena are enlisted into a coherent yet complex narrative.

Traverso touches very lightly and rarely explicitly upon the practice of historical periodisation but the organisation of the book suggests an underlying methodology. He also identifies a key temporal category: Braudel’s notion of a “conjuncture” or “cycle”, a period within which the distinct temporalities of long-term historical structures – the *longue durée* – and the fleeting “event” are brought together. It is argued that the notion of “European civil war” can be understood in this conjunctural sense: it is neither a unique, ephemeral occurrence nor a long-term movement in society but “a cycle in which a chain of catastrophic events – crises, conflicts, wars, revolutions – condenses a historical mutation whose premises were built up, over the *longue durée*, in the course of the preceding century” (42–43).

Some of the rationale for this conception of a 20th century European civil war is established through reference to its hypothetical antecedents: the Thirty Years’ War of 1618–48, which concluded with the

Peace of Westphalia; and the period following the French Revolution, ending with the Congress of Vienna in 1815. In the main, though, the argument is presented through a series of thematic chapters, focusing upon the period 1914-1945 but also trawling further into the past, engaging with events, processes, philosophical debates, political theory, and artistic representations, each of which has a distinct rhythm and timescale.

There is a tension within the book between the identification of inescapably geopolitical historical processes and those of an apparently transhistorical character. The conception of civil war employed frequently emphasises forms rather than causes, repeatedly embracing the notion that in such conflicts ferocity is without boundaries. To read the book as suggesting that periodic catastrophes, as that which occurred in 20th century Europe, take the form they do because of the human propensity for violence, is to do it a disservice, however. One aim is indeed to represent the phenomenology of civil war, how all “participants” whether civilians or belligerents were governed by its precepts, the novel forms and limitlessness of its violence. But it is also an account of the historically determined logic of civil war, a discussion of the extent to which all modes of critical thinking, ethical discourse, artistic and cultural representation and political theory were drawn into its ambit, foreclosing on the possibility of thinking outside of its logic.

Because the book conceives of its period as having a deep, paradigmatic and inexorable logic it is possible to present Leon Trotsky and Carl Schmitt as unreconcilable adversaries, but also as possessing similar analyses of their historical situation. Employing Carl Schmitt as a source is of course problematic, not simply because of his avowed Nazism but because his political philosophy is now regarded by some as recuperable. It is necessary to decide, therefore, if Schmitt offers historical insights irrespective of the deplorable context in which they first appeared, or whether his much broader critique of Enlightenment ideas has some value. Traverso does both: he considers Schmitt’s definitions of civil war and the “partisan” useful despite their wider context (65,79); and he stages a ‘dialogue’ between Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, on the grounds that the latter had drawn from Schmitt’s political theory some of its key categories. They had each, Traverso argues, formulated “a similar diagnosis of the crisis of the present, and the need to take a decision in order to escape from it..., but leading to opposite political therapies: revolution and counter-revolution” (243-244). One might argue, as TJ Clark has, that some “dangerous voices” one only consults “at a moment of true historical failure. We read them only when events oblige us to ask ourselves what it was, in our previous stagings of transfiguration, that led to the present debacle” (2012). Alternatively, the use of Schmitt or Ernst Jünger might be justified on the grounds that their ideas are not simply commentaries on civil war as an event requiring explanation, but are inseparable from its unfolding and complicit with it as a political project.

The dialectical tension integral to the concept of a European civil war is not always clearly communicated. There is a discussion of the frequent but rarely rigorous employment of the concept. The author cites its first use as by the German painter Franz Marc, shortly before his death at Verdun in March 1916. Ernst Jünger then adopted the term in 1930 in an essay reflecting on the apocalyptic nature of the 1914-18 war, and again in the wake of the German defeat at Stalingrad. The German philosopher Karl Löwith, in exile in Japan in 1940, used the concept of civil war to define the nihilistic character of both the First World War and the war then under way. Subsequently the concept of a European civil war had been accepted by historians, most notably and notoriously by conservative historian Ernst Nolte in *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917–1945* (1987), by Marxist Eric Hobsbawm

in *The Age of Extremes* (1996) and by Francois Furet in *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism In The Twentieth Century* (2000).

Traverso refers to the “richness and plurality of meanings” (28) with which the concept is associated but these are not always given sufficient background. The statement made by Franz Marc, for example, that the “European civil war” was “a war against the inner invisible enemy of the European spirit” (P.24) needs greater explanation. Marc had been a member of the Blaue Reiter group of expressionist painters and shared with the rest of the European avant garde a desire for cultural renewal, a feeling at its most intense in Italy and Germany where the view that war would be a great purging of the decadence ascendant in Europe was common. Given this context, Marc’s reference to a “European spirit” makes most sense in relation to a discussion, in the second half of the book, of the extraordinary consensus amongst intellectuals across Germany and the Hapsburg empire that the war was a mission to regenerate civilisation. Thomas Mann, Siegfried Kracauer, Wittgenstein and Freud were aroused by the patriotic frenzy. Traverso refers too to the patriotism that swept all of Europe in 1914 but these examples are not necessarily relevant, given that chauvinism took different forms in each of the belligerent nations. If in Britain patriotism had its precursors in the consolidation of the culture and ideology of empire in the preceding decades – the crowning of Victoria as Empress of India in 1877, public celebrations of the relief of Mafeking in 1900 – Wilhelmine Germany was distinct in that the cause of war was so often advocated in terms of a spiritual yearning and as a great civilising mission simultaneously expressed in the language of geopolitics: a recent monograph cites Thomas Mann’s response to the sinking of the *Lusitania*, in which the author enthused over “the destruction of that impudent symbol of English mastery of the sea and of a still comfortable civilisation, the sinking of the gigantic pleasure ship”, and a socialist journalist who was reported to have described the event as “the greatest act of heroism in the whole of human history” (Jasper 2016).

These bewildering manifestations of collective consciousness during the era of the Kaiserreich were not unconnected to the latter’s expansionary ambitions and its military leaders’ sense of the intolerable restrictions placed upon it by an international law perceived to be of benefit to Britain. How culture, collective mentalities and state action corresponded is not easy to establish, however. This would certainly have been an uneven relationship, developing at different tempos within each sphere, but Mann’s enthusiasm for submarine warfare and the drowning of civilians as part of the battle against cultural decadence is a perplexing example of such a configuration. That Traverso cites some of these examples but doesn’t place them more firmly within the political culture of Germany is a little frustrating. There is in contrast an excellent discussion of the end of Mitteleuropa: on the one hand it had “signified the geopolitical idea of a Grossdeutschland as the dominant power at the heart of the continent”; but it also denoted the “cultural unity of the Germanic world, beyond political frontiers”, a notion which then became identified during the interwar years with the mythical “legacy of the Hapsburg empire, multinational and cosmopolitan” in form. None of this survived the “ravages of the European civil war” and the redrawing of borders after 1945. But above all its end had been brought about by “the extermination of the Jews, who had been its real cultural cement” (125-126).

The issue of international law is a recurring theme in *Fire and Blood*. The first chapter begins with a short account of the “hundred year peace” born at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, during which Europe was disturbed only by short and limited conflicts: the Crimean war (1853-54); the Franco-Austrian war (1859); the Austro-Prussian war (1866-67); and the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71). There existed, it is argued, a “sentiment, deeply rooted in all countries of the continent, of belonging to one and the same civilisation and sharing the same values” (36). Because diplomacy was entrusted to

an aristocratic elite, all the members of which shared similar tastes and habits and held the same worldview, it was thought inconceivable that European peace could be shattered in the manner that occurred in 1914. The short explanation for the undermining of this common culture is the rise of nationalisms, but it is evident from subsequent chapters that the disintegration of consensus occurred also around issue of international law in relation to war, its ambiguities and ideological underpinning. This is palpable in the mentality of the German High Command in 1914, whose justification for the violence against Belgian civilians, widely seen by international public opinion as illegal, was the memory of the danger of ‘snipers’ during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71.

There is a digression into the social practice of duelling, legal in 19th century Prussia and encouraged within the aristocratic, military caste as a means of regulating conflict, but which went into sharp decline after 1914. The duel was analogous to, even a symptom of, the doctrine that war could only be declared by a legitimate authority, that it was bound by rules and that “use of force should be proportionate to the injustice suffered” (65). Duelling was the preserve of social elites, the objective was to wound but not kill the opponent, it was seen as an honourable and highly regulated exchange between adversaries each of whom recognised the legitimacy of the other. In this respect the duel embodied the principles of war, “codified [in a] system of relations between states possessing the monopoly of legitimate violence within their respective territories” (65).

The principles of proportionality, regulation and legitimacy have no place in civil war. Traverso quotes from Thucydides’ commentary, in the History of the Peloponnesian War, on the civil war that occurred on the island of Corcyra in 427 BCE: “as usually happens at such times, there was no length to which violence did not go” (71). He argues that Thucydides’ description of the phenomenology of violence could equally be applied to the 20th century, suggesting that the cruelty, atrocities and horror of civil war were intrinsic to a situation in which combat is not regulated by law and in which the complete destruction of the enemy is its only objective. But he also suggests that the impulse towards violence cannot be understood as part of a strategic calculation: the violence of civil war is a form of transgression, a “collective effervescence”, comparable to a festival in which what has been “traditionally forbidden is now permitted or prescribed” (84).

Because the book is premised upon the notion that civil war has a logic from which contending parties cannot withdraw, it inevitably has a complex position in relation to the violence of the left. Traverso begins by arguing that “the moral condemnation of violence” cannot “replace its analysis and interpretation” and that “if all civil wars are tragedies, some deserve commitment” (8). He rejects historical approaches in which revolutions from the left are characterised by their tendency towards “limitless terror”, and disclaims Ernst Nolte’s conception of totalitarianism, within which Nazi violence was a reaction to and imitation of the “class genocide” of the Bolsheviks.

The book tends to accept that violent resistance is a necessary expedient, whilst being sceptical of its defence on abstract philosophical grounds. The author recognises that in 1920 the Bolsheviks “practised terror as a weapon of survival, in a desperate struggle against an enemy that threatened to crush them”, but is less impressed by its justification “in the name of the laws of history..., the forceps needed to give birth to a new society..., the practices of the Cheka” finding “legitimation in Marx’s thesis of violence as the ‘midwife’ of history” (99).

There is an extensive discussion of Trotsky’s *Their Morals and Ours* (1938), in which the author had argued that “defence of the revolution meant unconditional approval of all the political and military

measures adopted by the Bolsheviks during the civil war”(149). The main weakness in the argument is not his justification of the conduct of the war, which Traverso sees as a realistic appraisal of the situation, but its confused and illogical attempt to postulate a morality of the proletarian revolution, embodied by Bolshevism and based on the rejection of any dualism between ends and means, qualifying this with the notion that not all means are acceptable but without specifying which. Trotsky is in other words at his weakest when he reveals himself to be a “good disciple of the Enlightenment”, rejecting the idea that morality can be embodied within a Kantian categorical imperative, but seeking for it another universal grounding, whereas, Traverso maintains, the revolutionary leader’s accurate perceptions were that “humanism” had “been felled in the trenches of the Great War and buried by a new age of tensions and conflicts” (253).

There is, on the other hand, a strand of discussion in *Fire and Blood* suggesting that the forms of “hot violence” endemic to civil war situations were not a Hobbesian “regression to a pre-political state of nature”, and that the desire for rules and ethical standards persisted amongst the carnage (81). The case of Simone Weil and her enlisting in the Spanish Republican cause is used to illustrate the moral dilemmas faced by someone who hated war and violence but who “couldn’t ethically refuse to participate” (255). In the anarchist militia in which she enrolled Weil saw “immorality, cynicism, fanaticism and cruelty rubb[ing] shoulders with love, the spirit of fraternity and above all the demand for honour that is so fine among humiliated men” (246). The partisan militia is a striking example of the prevalence of irregular combatants in civil war conditions, but they would often seek “to embody a new legitimacy” and to “set their own rules” (81). The historian of the Italian Resistance, Claudio Pavone, discussed the tendency within partisan groups to establish “normative standards”, and to demonstrate that they were not “brigands”, as their enemies maintained; thus, “summary execution” and “excesses of violence” coexisted with “an extremely sharp sense of justice and a firm morality of combat”. Weil observed that, despite the atrocities committed, “theft and rape were capital crimes in the anarchist militias” (82).

As the book’s final chapter, “The Antinomies of Antifascism”, argues, there was a turning-point - Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, reaching its “apogee during the Spanish Civil War” - when it was almost impossible to avoid being “caught up in the cleavage between fascism and antifascism” (258-259). A notable development was the “deep metamorphosis in the world of culture” within which the “transition from intellectual to fighter” occurred (256). Traverso considers that fighting fascism was a moral and existential obligation but his observations of the imperative forms of commitment: the taking up of arms, the “necessity of combat”, underline the overall theme of the book. He also expresses the view that antifascism didn’t really understand the nature of its adversary and the full extent of the calamity that had occurred, partly because it still inhabited the conceptual world of the 19th century:

“It is clearly impossible to grasp the modernity of fascism on the basis of a philosophy of history that postulates the evolution of humanity towards the ineluctable triumph of reason. Yet an important characteristic of antifascism, which contributes to explaining both its complacency towards Stalinism and its involuntary blindness to the Jewish genocide, was its bitter and uncritical defence of the idea of progress, inherited from the European culture of the nineteenth century” (274).

The philosophers of the era best able to grasp the catastrophe were those who refused the idea of progress: Adorno, who “shared the antifascist culture while remaining on its margins, aware that,

despite its defeat, Nazism had already changed the face of the century and the image of man”(275); and Walter Benjamin with his apocalyptic vision of history in ruins.

Fire and Blood is not a book about origins, even though there are legitimate questions still to be asked about the causes of the First World War. Nor is it a book about fascism in the 20th century, taking as it does a much broader perspective on the cataclysmic events of which fascism was so clearly a part. Nevertheless, there are moments in the book when fascism looms large. In the final chapter Traverso identifies Georges Bataille as someone who was sceptical towards antifascism, despite his anthropological critique of Nazism’s symbols and myths. He might have added, though, that Bataille had considered fascism to have an appeal not currently provided by bourgeois culture or its orthodox socialist opponents. It had, Bataille argued: “an effervescence of subversive heterogeneity”, its “transgressive, genuinely antibourgeois moments” and its “celebration of the mutilated and ecstatic body” offering a “timely reawaken[ing] of affective forces” (Jay 1993: 56-57).

Whilst Nazism is often characterised as anti-modern, its embrace of neoclassical architecture and its staging of Entartete Kunst - the Degenerate Art Exhibition – providing evidence of this, particularly in its early years it had a powerful modernist strand, a component of which came from the First World War experience, which for writers such as Ernst Jünger represented an ecstatic moment of frenzy, the erotic nature of which was realised through the technologies of war. In his novel *The Steel Cubicle*, Marinetti had imagined his adventures in the war with his armoured car: “equipped with a machine gun installed as a ‘spine’ at the rear...”, his “relationship with his vehicle was one of love, a source of the aesthetic and sensual pleasure celebrated in the futurist exaltation of the machine. Battle, or entering a town, became ‘forced coitus’ ” (211).

These horrible examples of sadism and misogyny are particularly disturbing because they were the product of a much wider culture than the one eventually established under Nazi rule, representing a repertoire of unrealised possibilities from which fascism could draw. That Nazism once in power promoted a culture of homogeneity, incorporating such imperatives as duty, discipline and obedience, neglecting the “explosive expressions of heterogeneity” (Jay: Ibid) anticipated by intellectuals of the radical right such as Schmitt and Jünger, might have been simply a question of timing, something that *Fire and Blood*, with its particular synthesis of distinct yet conjunctural temporalities conveys.

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